

School Health Promotion: Youth Empowering Students for Mental Health (YES4MH)

To: Chair and Members of the Board of Health

Meeting Date: September 3, 2025

Report No. **BH.01.SEP0325.R21**, Pages: 12

Prepared By: Anna Vanderlaan, Manager, Health Promotion

Approved By: Dr. Kyle Wilson, PhD, MBA, MSc
VP, Information Systems & Digital Innovation

Submitted By & Signature: *Original signed document on file.*
Dr. Nicola J. Mercer, MD, MBA, MPH, FRCPC
Medical Officer of Health & CEO

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Board of Health receive this report for information.

Key Points

- Key findings from the 2022 Well-being and Health Youth (WHY) survey identified a decline across all mental health indicators compared to 2019 data.
- To support student mental health, WDG Public Health collaborated with Upper Grand District School Board (UGDSB) and Wellington Catholic District School Board (WCDSB) to pilot the Youth Empowering Students for Mental Health (YES4MH) initiative in five secondary schools in 2023-24 and eight secondary schools in 2024-25.
- An evaluation of YES4MH highlighted the value and impact that student leadership, student engagement and cross-agency collaborations can have on student mental health and wellness.
- Further implementation of YES4MH across WDG schools, prioritized by school-specific mental health indicators from the WHY survey data, is being planned for the 2025-26 school year.

Background

Youth Mental Health

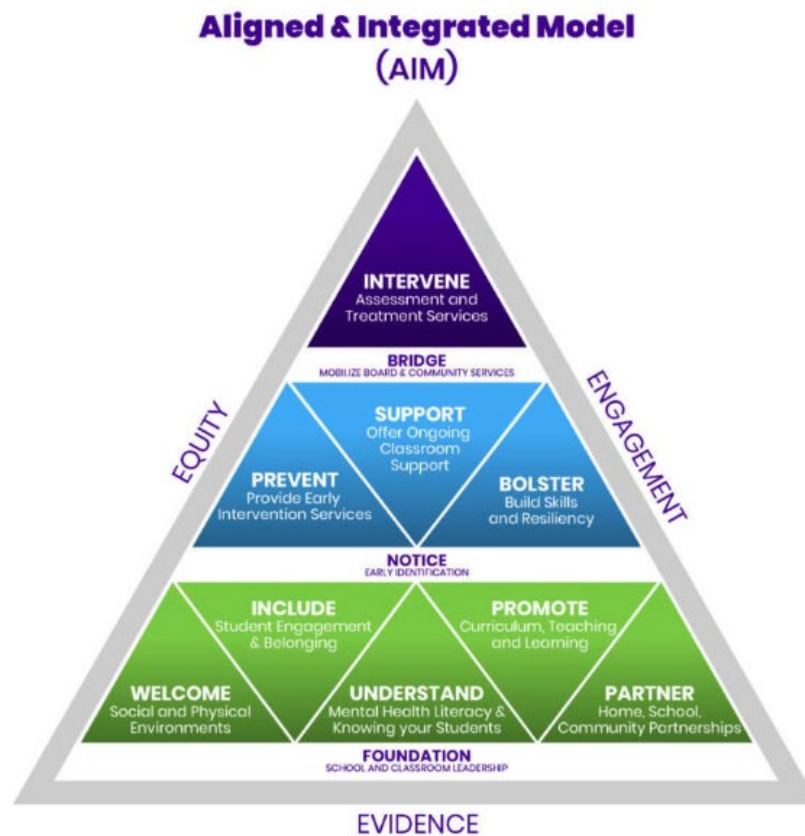
The mental health and well-being of youth continues to be a public health priority across the province. The Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph (WDG) Well-being and Health Youth (WHY) survey collects information to better understand the health and well-being of youth in WDG, including mental health. The data, collected every two years in partnership with Upper Grand District School Board (UGDSB) and Wellington Catholic District School Board (WCDSB), provides insights on health behaviours, mental health indicators and overall trends of the health and well-being of WDG youth. This information is used by WDG Public Health and school boards to identify priority areas of focus, inform decision making and plan for collaborative school health initiatives.

School Mental Health

The influence that social, economic and physical environments have on mental health and well-being brings opportunities for promoting mental health and wellness across settings where young people live, learn and play, especially schools.¹ A [May 2025 Board of Health report](#) described how protective factors including a positive school environment and engagement in extracurricular activities, help children and youth build resilience and positively influence overall well-being.² When a school community fosters supportive relationships and provides mentally healthy classrooms where all students feel safe, welcome and a sense of belonging, students develop social emotional wellness and positive mental health.³

The Aligned and Integrated Model (AIM) for school mental health (Figure 1) illustrates a tiered approach to student mental health support with the bottom tier representing mental health promotion as the foundation.⁴ This model highlights the significant role schools play in supporting student mental health and well-being and presents a great opportunity for collaborative efforts between WDG Public Health and schools to promote a universal and upstream approach to mental health promotion.

Figure 1. Aligned and Integrated Model (AIM) (School Mental Health Ontario)⁴



Student Engagement and Leadership

Students have important input about how to support mentally healthy schools. Providing opportunities for student leadership development and encouraging student engagement ensures youth have an active voice, role and choice in the promotion of mental health and wellness in their school.³ This level of student involvement contributes to positive outcomes related to mental health promotion and literacy including reduced stigma around mental illness and accessing mental health supports. Meaningful student engagement at school is a primary protective factor for students' overall well-being.⁵ These benefits include increased social connectedness and sense of belonging, feeling heard, listened to and validated by caring adults, more positive relationships with adults, increased self-esteem and self-confidence, increased sense of agency, experiential learning opportunities and skill development.⁵

Community Partnerships

The strong cross-sector partnership between WDG Public Health and local school boards provides a foundation for engaging in collaborative planning and strategic efforts around youth mental health promotion initiatives in schools. The WDG WHY survey data helps create a shared understanding of priority areas of focus that align with both WDG Public Health and school boards' goals for addressing youth mental health. Key findings from the 2022 WHY survey identified a decline across all positive mental health indicators compared to 2019 data including self-esteem, coping with issues and difficulties at school and feeling hopeful about their future.⁶ Similarly, poorer outcomes related to self-perceived mental health, eating issues, being distracted, psychological distress and body image were reported in 2022 compared to 2019.⁶ This information led to the exploration of new collaborative efforts to support youth mental health in schools.

In 2023, WDG Public Health collaborated with UGDSB and WCDSB to pilot the Youth Empowering Students for Mental Health (YES4MH) initiative.

Discussion

The YES4MH initiative, adapted with permission from Peel Region Public Health, is a student leadership and youth engagement approach to promoting mental health in schools and building capacity for creating learning environments that support mental health.

The objectives of YES4MH are to:

- Empower students to identify school priorities related to mental health and wellness.
- Guide student leaders in the development of peer-led initiatives that engage and promote mental health and well-being of youth.
- Improve students' mental health literacy and reduce stigma associated with mental illness.
- Increase awareness of mental health resources and supports.
- Build capacity within schools to create supportive and resilient school cultures.

Pilot schools

In collaboration with the school board mental health leads at UGDSB and WCDSB, five secondary schools were selected for piloting YES4MH in the 2023-24 school year. Schools were selected based on insight from the mental health leads, reviewing school-specific mental health indicators from the WHY data and identifying staff champions at each school to support the initiative. This pilot was followed by a process evaluation to help inform program improvement. To ensure greater opportunity for participation across WDG schools and enhance the sample size for evaluating the implementation of the program, YES4MH was further piloted

in eight secondary schools in the 2024-25 school year. Following this, an outcome evaluation was completed to assess program impacts.

Small monetary grants of \$300-500 were provided to participating schools to support the implementation of YES4MH initiatives and fund materials that may be needed for the youth-led action plans.

YES4MH 5-Step Model

The YES4MH initiative is represented by a five-step project cycle depicted in Figure 2. Participating schools were guided through the stages at their own pace:

Figure 2. YES4MH 5-step project cycle



Get Started. Collaboration with the school board mental health leads was essential in this step for selecting pilot schools and recruiting staff leads at each school to voluntarily oversee the project. Dedicated staff leads varied at each participating school including social workers, teachers, counsellors and principals. WDG Public Health staff met with school leads to provide an overview of YES4MH and sign an agreement outlining the YES4MH grant spending expectations. Staff were also required to complete the specialized training module titled *Promoting Mentally Healthy Schools and Resilience: Strategies for Educators*.⁷ In the Get Started phase, staff were responsible for establishing a committee of student leaders to implement the YES4MH initiative. Some schools formed a new group, and others used existing

wellness clubs or curriculum classes. Groups ranged in size from as small as four to as large as thirty students.

Learn Together. WDG Public Health staff visited each school to meet the student leaders participating in YES4MH. During these meetings, WDG Public Health staff led discussions about WHY data trends and whether students felt the data represented the trends in their school. Education was also shared around protective factors for mental health (e.g. nutrition, physical activity, sleep, sense of belonging, coping skills, positive and supportive environments). Students were guided through a “School Walkabout” activity in which they were encouraged to observe aspects of the physical and social elements of their school environment and reflect on how these might influence student mental health and well-being. The School Walkabout checklist (illustrated in Appendix A) acted as a tool to motivate and empower students to share perspectives and ideas for setting priority areas of focus for the YES4MH initiative at their school.

Develop a Plan. Observations and perspectives from the WHY findings and School Walkabout were used by students to inspire ideas and brainstorm action planning around promoting mental health and wellness at the school. The facilitation role of staff leads and WDG Public Health staff in this phase was important to ensure actions were student-led and feasible based on scope and funding available.

Take Action. YES4MH student leaders were responsible for implementing their action plans throughout the remainder of the school year. Some groups engaged their peers in social activities that promoted mental health while others focused on enhancing aspects of the physical environment to show mental wellness was valued at their school. The flexibility of this phase allowed student leaders to be creative in their actions. Some examples included:

- Designing mental health bulletin boards and displays to promote mental health information, positive messaging and student supports.
- Leading school-wide mental health activities (e.g. guided painting session, therapy dog visit, peer tutoring sessions, school spirit days).
- Creating “Unplugged” activity kits (e.g. board games, skipping ropes, crafts) and “Stress-less” kits (e.g. calming and fidget tools).
- Revamping physical spaces (e.g. social work office, mental health hub, “Zen Den”, faith room, outside social space).

Reflect and Celebrate. Encouraging the YES4MH groups to take time to reflect and celebrate the work they completed was an important component to the project. During this phase, a final feedback survey was completed, and schools were presented with a joint Mentally Healthy School certificate signed by WDG Public Health and the school board mental health leads commemorating their achievements and participation in YES4MH.

Evaluation Findings and Recommendations

Process Evaluation

A process evaluation was conducted following the pilot implementation of YES4MH with five schools in 2023-24. The purpose of the evaluation was to identify areas of improvement in the YES4MH implementation and apply any modifications prior to further delivery. Information was gathered from program records, a feedback survey and conversations with mental health leads, participating staff leads and student leaders.

Key learnings identified from the process evaluation were:

- **Start early:** The semesters become busy for school boards and schools and it was found that selecting schools and meeting with staff leads early in the semester was beneficial in providing time to establish YES4MH groups and get started.
- **YES4MH groups:** Utilizing existing school clubs was beneficial to sustaining student attendance and participation for the duration of the project compared to pilot schools who established a new YES4MH committee.
- **YES4MH in curriculum courses:** Tying YES4MH into curriculum (e.g., a Grade 12 leadership course) helped ensure accountability, sufficient time and student leadership skill development.
- **School Walkabout activity:** This activity was useful in helping students talk, reflect and provide input on the areas of focus for YES4MH. Staff shared that this activity allowed students to consider all spaces and aspects of the school.
- **Communication:** Ongoing communication between WDG Public Health staff, mental health leads and participating schools was important to ensure schools felt supported and were held accountable to the project.

Outcome Evaluation

Adopting the key learnings from the process evaluation, YES4MH was expanded into eight secondary schools in the 2024-25 school year. Mid-year and final feedback surveys were used to assess the objectives of YES4MH. All participating schools completed the mid-year check-in, and seven out of the eight schools completed the final feedback survey.

The key findings identified from the outcome evaluation were:

- **Mental health literacy and stigma:** 100% of respondents agreed that the YES4MH initiative improved mental health literacy and reduced stigma associated with mental illness in the school.
- **Mental health awareness:** All but one school agreed that YES4MH increased awareness of mental health and well-being resources and supports for students in the school.

- **Student empowerment and engagement:** All but one school agreed that YES4MH empowered students to be leaders and increased student engagement in mental health and well-being opportunities at the school.
- **Capacity building:** 100% of respondents agreed that YES4MH helped build capacity within school to create a supportive and resilient school environment.
- **Student-driven and led:** The majority of schools reported that the YES4MH actions were student-driven and student-led. Two schools reported YES4MH actions were not directly student-led but students were consulted with for ideas and perspectives.
- **Future interest:** All participating schools reported that they would be interested in participating in YES4MH again in the future.
- **Challenges:** Two schools reported challenges with sustaining a YES4MH committee of student leaders. Staff felt that implementing YES4MH into existing clubs or curriculum courses might better meet the objectives of YES4MH in the future.

Recommendations and Next Steps

Based on the evaluation data, the continuation of YES4MH into additional secondary schools is being planned for the 2025-26 school year with the following modifications:

- **Repeat implementation within select pilot schools:** Staff leads from participating pilot schools stated they were interested in hosting YES4MH again. Repeating select schools allows them to apply lessons learned and enhance the implementation efforts.
- **Continue to encourage implementation within curriculum courses or existing student committees:** These methods have been the most successful for maintaining student commitment and engagement.
- **Maintain collaboration:** Ongoing communication and support from both WDG Public Health and the school board mental health leads encourages accountability and success for participating schools.
- **Number of schools:** Based on staff capacity, WDG Public Health will aim to implement YES4MH in six to eight schools.

Health Equity Implications

Assessment of WHY data will continue to be used for identifying schools to prioritize implementation of the YES4MH initiative. WDG Public Health staff were available to support all participating schools. Although some student groups flourished independently, WDG Public Health Staff provided additional on-site visits or virtual meetings to groups requesting additional support.

One limitation noted by some schools in the 2024-25 school year, was the exceptionally high number of weather-related school closure or bus cancellation days which impacted the ability to

meet more regularly and maintain momentum with YES4MH. Further consideration regarding opportunities to support students and schools in rural areas will be discussed to ensure successful implementation of YES4MH in the future such as shifting timelines and hosting virtual meetings.

Conclusion

The YES4MH initiative highlights the value of collaborative contributions among community partners in addressing youth mental health and well-being. YES4MH supported efforts to develop mentally healthy schools by increasing capacity in training school staff, providing enhanced student leadership opportunities and peer-engagement within schools, and increasing mental health awareness and literacy.

WDG Public Health presented the YES4MH initiative at the Ontario Public Health Conference and the Ontario Healthy Schools Coalition Conference in 2024. These knowledge translation activities resulted in requests for more information about the project from four public health units who were interested in adapting the WDG Public Health version of the program to their region.

Data from the 2024 WHY survey showed an upward trend of mental health indicators for youth compared to 2022 data.⁸ The continuation of YES4MH, alongside other mental health strategies implemented at the school board and community level, are recommended to strengthen the collective effort towards supporting positive youth mental health in Wellington, Dufferin and Guelph.

Ontario Public Health Standards

Foundational Standards

- ☐ Population Health Assessment
- ☐ Health Equity
- ☒ Effective Public Health Practice
- ☐ Emergency Management

Program Standards

- ☒ Chronic Disease Prevention and Well-Being
- ☐ Food Safety
- ☐ Healthy Environments
- ☐ Healthy Growth and Development
- ☐ Immunization
- ☐ Infectious and Communicable Diseases Prevention and Control
- ☐ Safe Water
- ☒ School Health
- ☐ Substance Use and Injury Prevention

2024-2028 WDGPH Strategic Goals

More details about these strategic goals can be found in [WDGPH's 2024-2028 Strategic Plan](#).

- ☐ Improve health outcomes
- ☒ Focus on children's health
- ☒ Build strong partnerships
- ☐ Innovate our programs and services
- ☐ Lead the way toward a sustainable Public Health system

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Appendices

Appendix A: School Walkabout Checklist

Youth Empowering Students for Mental Health (YES4MH) School Walkabout

What is the School Walkabout?

The YES4MH School Walkabout has three main purposes:



- To gain a student perspective of the current **physical** and **social elements of the school environment** that may influence student mental health and well-being.
- Educate students on **protective factors** for mental health:
 - Nutrition
 - Physical Activity
 - Sleep
 - Sense of Belonging
 - Engagement & Connections
 - Supportive Relationships
 - Self-Regulation & Coping Skills
 - Positive Learning Environment
- To identify focus areas for the YES4MH action plan.

Who participates in the Walkabout?

YES4MH committee members will participate in the walkabout (e.g., student leads, teachers/staff leads, Public Health lead).

Step 1: Use Checklist to Record Observations

- Think about what you “**see**” and “**feel**” in the physical and social environments that may influence student mental health and wellness:
 - Is the space **welcoming**?
 - Do students appear and feel **connected**?
 - Does the space promote mental health **literacy** or provide opportunities to learn about mental health and wellness?
 - Are **resources** and supports available to students?
- Identify areas of **strength** and areas for **improvement** of the physical and social environment.
- Consider whether the **time of day** for doing “School Walkabout” would change your observations.

Step 2: Reflect and Discuss Observations

- Discuss the results of the walkabout.
- Were there common observations made among group members?
- What physical and social elements of the school environment are most concerning?
- Can the group agree on a focus area from the walkabout findings that promotes mental wellbeing?

Youth Empowering Students for Mental Health (YES4MH) School Walkabout Checklist

Places to go and what to look for		What did you observe? Be sure to label the locations you are describing.
Inside school: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Entrance Hallways Classrooms Bathrooms Gym Library Lunch area 	Does the space look sanitary, clean, healthy?	
	Does the space look safe and accessible for everyone?	
	Does the space feel welcoming for all students and staff?	
	Does the space provide opportunities to learn about mental health and wellness?	
	Do students appear to be happy and content?	
	Do you observe students speaking and interacting positively with each other?	
	Do students appear to have positive body language?	

	Do students appear to be alone and isolated?	
	Any other observations or comments?	
Outside school: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tarmac • Field • Pick-up/Drop-off zone 	Does the area look sanitary, clean, healthy?	
	Does the area look safe and accessible for everyone?	
	Does the area feel welcoming for all students and staff?	
	Does the area provide opportunities to learn about mental health and wellness?	
	Do students appear to be happy and content?	
	Do you observe students speaking and interacting positively with each other?	
	Do students appear to have positive body language?	
	Do students appear to be alone and isolated?	
	Any other observations or comments?	
School Culture	Do staff and students appear to have positive and supportive relationships with each other?	
	Are school clubs, committees, and activities inclusive of all students?	
	Are different cultures, religions and diverse groups recognized and celebrated?	
Other		
Walkabout Date(s):		
Completed By:		